TOPIC: In "The Better Angels of Our Nature", Steven Pinker writes, "Violence has been in decline for long stretches of time, and today may be the most peaceful era in our species' history." Considering both theoretical perspectives and historical experiences, evaluate to what extent development will reduce the likelihood of violent conflict?

For much of the cold war era there has been a dominant theory that has controlled western diplomatic policies, that is that economic development acts as a solvent for violent conflict. This logic may seem feasible, but it is not always that simple. Although, it is true that wealthier societies are less likely to be pro-war when it comes to foreign conflicts because they tend to be more conservative and doesn't want to change the status quo. However, conflicts in the late twentieth century and recent conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian war have called doubts upon the theory. To understand this relationship requires a careful examination of competing theoretical models and a grounded analysis of historical cases.

There are three main schools of thought on development and conflict. Modernization theorists, in the tradition of Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, pp. 75-80), contend that development produces economic prosperity, a middle class and cross-cutting social cleavages that temper political extremism. That is, development decreases the risk of conflict by making violence more costly. On the other hand, grievance theories such as Frances Stewart (2008, pp. 25-40) argue that development can reinforce horizontal inequalities (between ethnic, religious or regional groups), thus creating grievances and mobilizing for conflict. But most research is a cross-country comparison that mask mechanisms. And fewer compare cases where development has helped de-escalate, to cases where development has preceded escalation. This research, instead, compares the importance of development to other determinants of conflict such as governance, diversity, and security. This essay builds on this work to answer the question: How much will development reduce violent conflict? This is not a simple yes or no question. This essay suggests that development has a moderate, conditional effect on conflict — that is, only when combined with inclusive political institutions, equitable distribution and effective state capacity. In the absence of these factors, development can actually raise the risk of conflict by generating new assets for which to fight and by raising expectations that governments cannot satisfy. The issue is not whether development matters because it obviously does, but how much it matters compared to institutions and political inclusion.

To establish this point, the essay has four sections. The first section explores theoretical approaches, comparing modernization theory to grievance- and greed-based theories. The next section considers development that contributed to decreasing conflict, such as the cold war arms race. The third section examines cases of development preceding conflict, such as the Rwandan genocide and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The conclusion draws inferences and provides a qualified verdict.

Theoretical Perspectives :The best argument supporting development as a pacifying factor comes from modernization theory. Lipset's (1959, pp. 78–82) classic argument is that economic development is associated with political stability because it allows for overlapping associational memberships, diminishes zero–sum attitudes, and creates a middle class with an interest in stability. Ted Robert Gurr (1970, pp. 55–65) went further and argued that development lessens relative deprivation: as absolute living standards increase, the difference between expected living standards and real living standards decreases, and with it the frustration that leads to rebellion. Thus, a developing country should be at lower risk of civil war when moving from low–income to middle–income status. But the grievance theorists are not so sanguine. Stewart (2008, pp. 30–38) shows development can be uneven. Regional and ethnic differences in development increase horizontal inequalities. Historically disadvantaged groups (such as the Tutsi in Rwanda or the southerners in Sudan) may feel worse off despite rising GDP. Development is not a solution but a source of new frustration. All in all, these theories indicate that development is not a curse. Its impact depends on institutions, whether they distribute benefits fairly, whether the state can tax and spend freely of capture, and whether politics can accommodate different groups. In large part, the theoretical models are in agreement about when development will reduce conflict.

Historical Cases: Where Development Reduced Conflict The best–known instance where development reduced conflict is post–war Western Europe. From 1945 to 1975, Western European economies grew at record pace, spurred by Marshall Plan assistance, European integration and Keynesian demand management. More significantly, this was coupled with the development of welfare states, tripartite bargaining, and inclusive political institutions. Germany and France, which had fought three wars between 1870 and 1945, became the anchor of a peaceful regional order. This did not come about through development alone: institutional engineering (the European Coal and Steel Community) and Cold War security were required. But development increased the opportunity costs of war so much that war within Europe became unviable. The opportunity cost mechanism worked: German and French industrialists would lose more by war than they would win. These examples are compelling, but not universal. Development led to less conflict because it was accompanied by inclusive institutions and inclusive distribution. Where they were not, history has a different story.

The nuclear standoff between the soviets and US is one of the most iconic cases of all. In 1949 the soviet union developed their first nuclear weapon making them the second country in the world to gain the power of leveling entire cities to the ground. This shattered the USA's monopoly in nuclear weapons and it soon dawned on American politicians that a nuclear shadow has fallen on them and most of all posing an unprecedented threat to the American mainland. This change in the balance of power formed the most fundamental rule of Cold War politics influencing every decision and policy throughout the Cold War era. The rule is called MAD (mutually assured destruction), if two or more superpowers that all have the capability of destroying another country then war is too much of a threat. This is main reason why there hasn't been a war with two major superpowers ever since the invention of mass destruction weapons. This rule is still the most fundamental force shaping major country diplomacy.

Counter—Cases：The case of Rwanda in the 1980s is a counter—example. Between 1975 and 1990, Rwanda enjoyed consistent economic growth, and coffee exports and per capita incomes grew slightly. International donors lauded the country's success. But this development exacerbated horizontal tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi groups, as Tutsi elites benefited disproportionately from the export sector. At the same time, world coffee prices collapsed in the late 1980s, resulting in a severe recession, and bringing about the relative deprivation Gurr highlighted as a cause of conflict. Rwanda's 1994 genocide, which claimed some 800,000 lives, was not the result of poor development but arguably the result of inequitable and then falling development. Development did not pacify the country — it obscured the problem until the economy collapsed. These case studies demonstrate development's conflict reduction effects are contingent. Unequal, commodity—based, or politically—exclusive growth can even raise the risk of conflict. The reason is increased expectations that governments cannot meet.

Conclusion：How much will development decrease violent conflict? The evidence from theory and history justifies the conclusion that development has a moderate conditional effect on conflict. Modernization theory's central insight that development increases the cost of war holds, as Europe's post—war experience shows. But development does this only if it is inclusive, egalitarian, and accompanied by good state capacity. Development that is concentrated, extractive, or politically isolated can deepen horizontal inequalities and raise expectations — both of which lead to conflict. Other factors clearly matter. Ethnic diversity, neighbourhood effects and previous conflict also affect conflict trajectories. The existence of a strong state is critical: development in the absence of a strong, legitimate state is as likely to lead to conflict as to alleviate it. In short, development is a precondition for peace, not a cause.

It creates resources that can sustain inclusive political and economic institutions and increase the costs of war — provided political leaders choose to share these resources fairly. To this limited but significant extent, development will reduce the likelihood of violent conflict. But to a greater degree, political outcomes determine whether development is a source of peace or war.